

# FEATURES

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## Making music not war, in Baghdad

Ransacked by looters and threatened by religious militias, the Institute of Musical Studies is slowly recovering from its wounds after the 'dark period' that followed the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003

BY INES BEL AIBA  
AFP, BAGHDAD



Students practice on their ouds, above, and on a string instrument known in Arabic as a jawzeh, below, at the Institute of Musical Studies in central Baghdad.

The Baghdad Institute of Music once again hums with activity after years of silence enforced by fear. Students hasten along corridors, lute in hand, as others laugh and gossip on a sun-bathed patio.

Hazar Bassem, 20, is wearing a denim skirt and high-heeled court shoes as she practices patiently on the hurdy-gurdy, or wheel fiddle.

During the "events," as many Iraqis call the wave of murderous sectarian slaughter that followed the US-led invasion of 2003, Bassem was one of the few students to keep turning up for class.

"We made jihad [holy war] with music. This year is the first time the institute has returned to normal," said Bassem who lives on Haifa Street, once the most notorious and deadly thoroughfare in Baghdad.

The institute's location has been partly to blame for its problems.

The stone building dating back to the 1940s stands near Iraq's telecommunications headquarters, torn open by bombardment during the invasion nearly six years ago.

Later it suffered even further as looting and militias, both Sunni and Shiite, imposed their will on sections of the Iraqi capital, proving an even greater obstacle to learning and making music.

"The windows were smashed, doors torn from their hinges, library books ripped apart and strewn everywhere ... You'd have thought the place had been hit by an earthquake," says the director, Sattar Naji.

But good humor now reigns as the sound of music filters through windows shattered by explosions that rocked the area.

"I had colleagues who were killed or kidnapped," says Bassem. "We still haven't heard what happened to some of them."

Restored with help from the UN cultural agency UNESCO, the Baghdad Institute of Music may have returned to its former physical glory, but the number of dusty and unused music stands remains a worry.

### IN THOSE DARK TIMES WE KEPT OUR HEADS DOWN

The Institute now has around 60 students — as opposed to more than 120 in 2003 — who began returning at the start of 2008 following the reduction of violence because of the US-Iraqi security "surge" in the capital.

Before aspiring musicians had to be under 18 years old to be accepted, but that requirement has now been waived in an effort to attract more talent.

The schools' activities come amid a revival of cultural life in Iraq, with art galleries planning to return from their exile in Amman, the opening of the Iraq Museum — closed since the US-led invasion in March 2003 — today, and a cautious pickup in nightlife.

During a five-year course, the young musicians specialize in one or several traditional Arab instruments such as the *nay* or cane flute, and the *santur*, a form of hammered dulcimer.

They then complete their studies at the Baghdad Academy of Fine Arts.

At the institute, students play the Middle Eastern lute or oud, sitting along the rim of a now dry fountain. Girls studying here, once as numerous as the boys, can be counted on one hand.

But as before, they all hope to follow in the footsteps of Iraq's late Munir Bashir, a founder of the institute known as the "Emir of the Oud" for his rendition of the *maqam* or traditional Arab music.

"The students are so enthusiastic that they even come on their days off and holidays," beams director Naji.

Twenty-year-old Saif Salman nods in agreement. "I come every day," he says. "Sometimes my family worries, but at least these days I can go out with my oud and not be afraid."

Not long ago, an artist carrying such an instrument in the street was likely to be targeted by roaming death squads.

"All we could do in those dark times was keep our heads down," says Naji.

The memories of those terrible days are still too strong for some.

"I don't want to talk about that," says 21-year-old Saad Alaydin, lowering his eyes. He prefers to show off his homemade hurdy-gurdy instead.

"A coconut, a few screws, some shells to make it pretty — and there you have it," he smiles before walking off to return to class.



## PLANET POP

A Hong Kong actress at the center of an Internet sex photo scandal has broken her silence about the incident, lashing out at the pop star who took the compromising pictures.

**Cecilia Cheung** (張柏芝), one of several local celebrities shown in the photos with Hong Kong-Canadian actor and singer **Edison Chen** (陳冠希), said he had never apologized, and that she was still reeling from the ordeal a year later.

"He has never apologized to us personally," Cheung told iCable in an interview broadcast late Friday, according to a report in the *South China Morning Post*.

"He should at least have called us to say sorry if he genuinely admitted his mistake."

She added: "The photos are

still circulating online. How can we live a healthy and happy life? How can we put ourselves back on our feet?"

The photos — showing Chen in compromising positions with various celebrities including Cheung, Canto-pop star **Gillian Chung** (鍾欣桐) and former actress **Bobo Chan** (陳文媛) — became an Internet sensation when they were posted a year ago.

Cheung said she decided to break her silence after Chen gave evidence earlier this week in a Canadian court in the case of the computer technician charged with illegally posting the photos online.

The 28-year-old Chen for the first time identified Cheung, Chung and Chan in the Vancouver court as some of the women in the photos, but said later outside court he wanted to "protect" them and that they had "suffered enough," the *Post* reported.

Cheung, also 28, angrily retorted: "You should not have come out [now] ... saying one thing but doing another in a bid to win the public's forgiveness whilst hurting us."

Hip-hop star **Kanye West** trashed Radiohead and said the public should give **Chris Brown** "a break," during a recent taping of VH1's *Storytellers*. But the comments did not make it to air when the episode premiered on the US cable network on Saturday.

Kanye West: Give Chris Brown "a break."

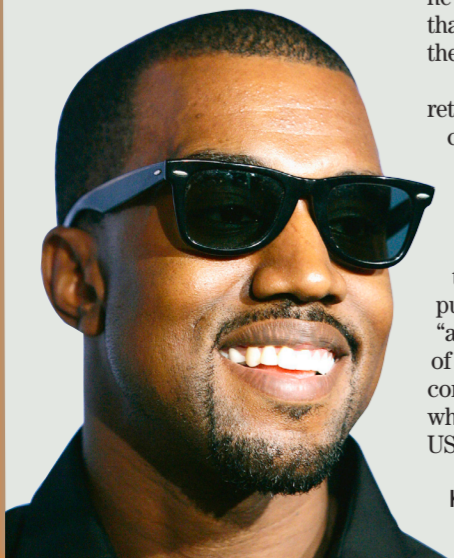


PHOTO: AP

The taping, which took place on February 13, lasted three hours. The show's producers cut it to 90 minutes, after getting network approval to expand the episode from its usual one hour.

During the taping, according to a Reuters reporter, West was aggrieved that Radiohead singer **Thom Yorke** had allegedly snubbed him backstage at the Grammys. That hurt, West told the audience, because he idolizes the British band, and considers it one of his few creative rivals. "So when he performed at the Grammys, I sat the f— down," West said.

A little later, West asked the crowd, "Can't we give Chris a break? ... I know I make mistakes in life." He was referring to R 'n' B singer **Chris Brown**, who was arrested on the night of the Grammys on suspicion of beating his girlfriend **Rihanna**.

Brown and Rihanna, meanwhile, were reported on Friday to have reunited, less than three weeks after he was alleged to have assaulted her.

The handful of optimistic Guns N' Roses fans still holding out for a reunion of the band's classic lineup can probably call it a day.

In a newly published interview, singer **Axl Rose** describes former bandmate **Slash** as "a cancer," elevating his distaste for the top-hatted guitarist to a new level.

Rose is the only original member left in Guns N' Roses, whose first studio album in 17

years, *Chinese Democracy*, bombed badly in November. Slash quit the band in the mid-1990s, with both sides offering different reasons.

In a rare interview, published on Friday at AOL Music's spinner.com Web site, Rose sat down for a friendly chat with his pal, songwriter **Del James**.

When the topic of a reunion inevitably came up, Rose said it was "highly doubtful for us to have more than one of the alumni up with us at any given time."

"I suppose [former bass player] **Duff [McKagan]** could play guitar on something somewhere but there's zero possibility of me having anything to do with Slash," Rose said.

"In a nutshell, personally I consider him a cancer and better removed, avoided — and the less anyone heard of him or his supporters the better."

Rose was not even a fan of Slash's guitar playing, claiming he has lost his edge and seems to be more passionate about being "a whore for the limelight."

As for the other former bandmates, Rose said rhythm guitarist **Izzy Stradlin**'s recent guest turn on stage with the band were fun, but that his old Indiana buddy was not the most reliable collaborator.

And drummer **Steven Adler**, who was fired in 1990 for excessive drug abuse, brings "assorted ambulance-chasing



Brazilian supermodel Gisele married American football star Tom Brady.

PHOTO: AFP

attorneys ... One gig or even a couple songs could mean years of behind-the-scenes legal aftermath." The drummer, who successfully sued the band for royalties, was recently seen on reality shows *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* and *Sober House*.

Brazilian model **Gisele Bündchen**, 28, married National Football League star **Tom Brady**, 31, in Los Angeles on Thursday, *Us Weekly* reported. The celebrity magazine said the ceremony took place at a Catholic church and the guests were mostly immediate family members. The bride wore Dolce & Gabbana as did her three dogs.

The *Stumdog Millionaire* child actor from the shantytowns

of Mumbai who won the hearts of international audiences at the Oscars' ceremony has apparently also regained the affection of her mother, who walked out of her life five years ago.

Nine-year-old **Rubina Ali**, who plays Latika, the childhood sweetheart of the hero in the movie, returned this week to the Garib Nagar slum to find herself the center of unwanted attention. Amid the thronging crowds was her mother, **Khushi**, who says she wants to return to share the limelight with her famous daughter — and perhaps the new flat she was awarded.

Khushi left Rubina's father **Rafiq**, a carpenter, and their three children five years ago to marry "some rich person" and never came back. "We have brought up Rubina after her mother left her. Now that Rubina has become successful, [she] is claiming the flat, which has been given to Rubina," Rafiq told the Indian media.

The upsurge in maternal feelings is lost on Rubina, who told reporters: "Why did she leave me when I was a baby? I will stay with my father."

The urban Indian media has been charmed by Rubina, a rare occurrence in a country where the poor are at best pitied. In one telling exchange, she was asked what it was like to be in a Hollywood movie. She replied: "Those people were very good. They never hit us."

— AGENCIES